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ABSTRACT

This discussion of library services in prisons addresses the following topics: (1) the provision of the New York State Department of Correctional Services for library services to prison inmates as an attempt to make changes in inmate problem-solving abilities; (2) the role of library services in prisons; (3) library entrepreneurship as a new library priority; and (4) the status of libraries in their association with prisons from a political viewpoint. (CGD)

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KEYNOTE SPEECH

INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION OF LIBRARY ASSOCIATIONS AND INSTITUTIONS

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Pre-Conference on Prison Libraries

A rationale for library services in today's prison.

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I welcome this opportunity to exchange viewpoints about the rationale, role and status of prison libraries. Without this International Forum and the invitation extended by IFLA through the diligent work of Phyllis Dalton, many of us, both administrators and practitioners, would remain isolated with little comprehensive information. It is clear that only from the comparative knowledge of how others meet the challenge can solutions spring forth for all.

A RATIONALE FOR LIBRARY SERVICES IN TODAY'S PRISONS

Our rationale for providing library services to inmates in prison is a serious mission: it is to provide the means by which a change in inmate thinking can occur, a change that can affect the way problems are approached and solved by inmates themselves.

An inmate who has a background of information from which to draw upon can be considered empowered. This is because access to information can indicate directions to be followed in solving many of life's dilemmas.

The inmate with an ample supply of information gained from the experience of others -- often with a similar set of problems -- has an additional reservoir to call upon as alternatives to unplanned impulsive actions, or violence.

In this way, information is powerful, and the "right" information becomes a constructive tool.

People who do not have access to sources of information may be considered as "information poor". Prison populations have been identified as "information poor" since they rarely have adequate experience with information as a source of power. They often rely upon a narrow range of inaccurate information which is used to decide a serious course of action.

Few inmates are accustomed to working with library sources of information that can be marshalled to affect the critical areas of their life such as: family ties, health issues; parenting; and employment training or career opportunities. Information becomes and is available only for those who know where to look for it and to appreciate it's value.

But, "information poor" inmates must be instructed in the inherent value of information if they are to discover and appreciate its impact upon their lives. Only then are they ready to be taught about the existence of library materials as aids to problem solving and decision making.

THE ROLE OF LIBRARY SERVICES

We feel that prison libraries under enlightened librarians do not assume that inmates are self-motivated library users. This has been a false assumption. Prison librarians, instead, must reach out to inmates with a message about the direct value of utilizing sources of information. And, inmates must be reached in a variety of ways appropriate to different levels of abilities and interests.

The time during incarceration can be important. It can be utilized to increase opportunities to achieve an additional perspective; to look at a set of problems perhaps more objectively and rationally weigh the alternatives. This kind of thinking can make a difference in a inmate's life by opening the way for positive behavorial change to occur.

Additionally, this type of change is most important because it is self directed and internalized instead of being a rote or superficial reaction to the external authority figures in prison.

Through the dissemination of materials in critical areas specifically directed to allow self discovery, the library program enriches the other educational efforts within the facility. Good prison librarians today can and do focus upon this type of training. They teach the skills inmates need to acquire access to information and to retrieve facts. Many viewpoints are presented by the librarian so that users can find their own way to making their own choices.

Prison libraries are an intergral part of programs by providing support for all programming efforts. Program Services' educational and vocational units focus upon the teaching of new or improving existing skills. A strong library program is a necessary component to complement these programs with dependable supplementary materials. No educational program today can be considered complete, nor is taken seriously without strong library input.

For example, no career training and skill development effort can be isolated from its current sources of information. And, since information in these areas is always changing, constant updating through a network of library resources is indicated as the most opportune provider.

We feel that good prison librarians today do not simply stock books on shelves as the end product for recreational reading.

Requirements for prison librarians may vary from state to state, but in New York State the standard is a Masters Degree from an accredited library school. There is recognitiion that a professional degree is necessary to engage in the duties of collection development and comprehensive planning for programming activities, etc. Support staff available in some of the larger prisons consists of a civilian library clerk, to perform the clerical duties of library service. Out of forty one-person professionals in state prisons there are about fifteen civilian clerks. We work to increase this number, but run into budget constraints at this time. Without some of the routine tasks provided for, it is difficult to move into the innovative areas that will and do indicate better service.

Therefore, a primary focus is to remain a strong advocate for support service.

Past assumptions about prison libraries and the type of prevalent service given have centered solely upon improving collection development. The thinking was that with the proper resources: ample quantities of inviting books and non-print materials, appreciative inmates would beat a path to the library doors.

Certainly, many inmates have come and appreciated the efforts made to provide pertinent books, since the emphasis was placed upon building up adequate collections. Prison libraries, however, have always been hindered by never having enough funds to provide for all legitimate needs at any one given time. But developing the collection has remained the single top priority of our prison librarians, and one that continues to frustrate.

This single focus upon development and acquisitions has become increasingly difficult since our inmate populations now contain more diverse groups to be served: those unable physically to go to the library, "outreach populations" such as hospital and Special Housing (SHU) inmates; the inmate involved within academic education including the college student inmate; the inmate self-help reader; the low level inmate reader; the non-English speaking inmate; the illiterate inmate; and groups of inmate organizations and clubs. Needs, therefore, have expanded enormously.

Judicious decisions have been made to establish well-rounded collections, but it is clearly impossible to have "something for everyone" on the shelves of our facility libraries. This needs to be stated without apology in order to redirect this past focus, a focus, I feel, that has prevented reaching out to all prisoners as potential library users.

The job, as I see it, is to redefine library services and not focus solely upon internal collection development in trying to replicate the Public Library holdings. Rather, it is to have the resources on hand to determine where books and materials may be obtained from outside.

This presupposes the development of a system of regional information tied into public libraries as sources of supply.

Out of necessity, different public community libraries have pooled their resources into systems and networks, making arrangements which identify their holdings so that joint catalogs are distributed including the prison libraries. Rather than expend all energies to accumulate collections that try to replicate those of the public library, resources can be brought into the prison library, through arrangements for interlibrary loans. (Of course, not all material is available, such as reference books.)

The nature of prison library services, however, can be changed quite a bit with this approach: it is the sharing of resources statewide using a system of library loans. Not everything should or can be purchased for the prison library.

Each facility funds a line item specifically for the general library so that there is a budget. The uneven flow of discarded books donated to prison libraries in the past, it is recognized, can not begin to address comprehensive needs for tailoring collections now.

These internal efforts have been helped tremendously through establishment in 1984 of a State Education Law that requires the network of Public Library Systems to provide library services alloted at $9.25 per inmate annually, based upon each prison population count. Sixteen different systems have prisons in their geographic area, out of the total of twenty two in New York State, and participate in this service. This Library Omnibus Bill aid is utilized greatly for Interlibrary Loan services and supplemental materials for our academic students, as well as consultant visits and workshops.

Generally speaking, it is the policy of library administrators to set plans in motion. Specifically, it is wise to consider all cultural and ethnic backgrounds of prisoners in order to bring the products of the prison library to its largest potential audience.

One case can illustrate problems in working this through, e.g., a group of Hispanic prisoners whose background country does not have free public library services as we know them. They need to be reached to understand the library as an institution. One method is to pay attention to their cultural needs.

It is interconnections - and the degree they succeed, or fail to link together well with a prisoner's heritage - that can directly shape each library operation.

In this way, the discussion becomes one of looking at prison libraries through their marketing and public relations abilities. "Entrepreneurship" is perhaps the best word to describe these activities.

Perhaps, encouraging the prison librarian to be an entrepreneur indicates the best means to accomplish this mission. The entrepreneur is more commonly spoken of in the language of the American business community. However, we have adapted these techniques of marketing to the prison library.

Firmly embedded in this approach is the need to reach out to those not knowledgeable about the role a library can play in their lives. This is the group of people who do not use libraries.

It is always necessary at the same time, to remember to increase library usefullness to current library users so that there remains some relationship to each group's informational needs: users and non-users.

It is not indicated from the prison program literature[1] that there is a unified approach to achievement of this type of service.

Without more sharing of different entrepreneurial efforts in library programing, successful ideas do not carry over from one library to another, or seem connected. The remedy should include better international exhanges used to gain insights about disadvantaged groups as potential library users.

Often it is people everywhere drawn from disadvantaged backgrounds to whom the library has remained an invisible institution, without practical meaning to their lives.

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[1] A search of twenty years of a comprehensive computer generated English language bibliography on prison library literature failed to reveal any appropriate patterns. Beyond each innovative effort: a single project here to there - there seems little attempt to replicate work. And, lack of information does not directly seem to link up with success.

Why not go further and explore the possiblity that any individual who is not familiar with the role a library can play in enriching daily life is considered "disadvantaged". This is particularly true in prison libraries where disadvantaged groups are disproportionally represented. It is well argued that in America prisoners represent most inner city, disadvantaged populations. Within this broader definition, all prison non-library users are somewhere waiting to be interested in a variety of library services, perhaps through entrepreneurial efforts in programming.

In other words, any law abiding, workable method that makes the library "visible" to non-users is worthy of consideration. Low visibility, or the lack of a clear vision of what a library is about, becomes the problem to attack. The question is how.

Our experience is that disadvantaged people include many to whom cultural heritage is of great importance and interest. They have, perhaps, gained a heightened awareness of their own roots or background from the efforts of educational or religious groups who seek to instill and strengthen these feelings. Cultural information provides not only a key to who they are, but covertly who they might wish to become.

It seems clear, then, that methods to make information available about ethnic "roots" draws attention.

Programming ideas for the disadvantaged is limited only by imagination. Not to be overlooked, also, is the active participation in planning by the target audience itself.

In a prison demonstration project[2], participation by a group of inmates in the crucial elements of planning was integral. Since all of the events were initiated by the prisoner's group itself, there was a sense of ownership in the success of the programs.

The facility librarian began the month long project by sitting down with inmate library clerks and other invited inmates, the latter represented various ethnic groups and inmate organizations in the prison population. The discussion centered upon how to attract non-users to the library through a series of special programs produced for the library. At the same time, the intensive month's events were sponsored to increase users' awareness of library services.

It was clear from the start that there was a bank of enthusiastic inmates from which to draw ideas. They formed into an "Inmate Think Tank" and provided most of the program ideas that were adopted and finally produced.

The "Inmate Think Tank" also became an informal network that promoted the planned events among their peers. Thus program visibility was enhanced and attendance soared. The month-long project not only was successful, but continued to generate interest long afterward.

We have been successful with another idea to capitalize upon the spirit and pride of ethnicity. The library produced a Monthly Timeline: one that features information about dates of cultural celebrations of interest to the target population. The Timeline has been developed, in one place, by the inmate library

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[2]Albert, Myra. "Redirecting Library Services for State Correctional Prisons", The Bookmark, Volume 44, No. 11, Winter, 1986.

clerk staff who chose the featured events for each month and researched the facts with the help of the professional librarian.

Timelines have highlighted the Martin Luther King holiday, outlined the little known contribution of blacks in the building of the west, targeted Hispanic Heritage Day, and/or traced the connections between native Americans and Blacks.

The Timeline project tapped into a variety of prisoners' artistic talents too, utilized within design of the product. Word of mouth once again continued to be the best publicity vehicle.

This type of project also offered a way to build upon the individual Timeline theme with library displays of books and appropriate materials.

Additionally, displays can be focused to appeal to low-level readers and illiterates. These groups may be drawn into the library through a variety of programs that do not depend solely upon reading ability. For example a successful prison program was developed utilizing the theme "Cartooning Workshop" which concentrated upon something familiar to the average non-reader.

It is possible to spark interest in the library by publicizing a weekly or daily little know "fact" sheet selected to describe some area of high interest to the target population.

A "trivia handout" does not represent a large investment in resources, but generates comments. A little know "fact" about a health question or sports figure, for example, may hold an attraction for many.

It is not difficult to have this handout also contain a question or two about the selected topic that can be answered by a bit of library research. It can be developed into a contest sponsored by the library. Additionally, a Calender of Special Events need not be limited to the usual holidays. It can be geared to include ethnic and cultural celebrations and heros or heroines.

As a backdrop to this intense focus on ethnicity, it should not sound absurd now to think of ways to promote libraries as a place to celebrate "imagination". Imagination days can include puclicizing a "good idea" traced from the past or a new current application. This can also provide ways to group people together in an equilitarian or unusual manner. For example, there is nothing to prohibit "Left-Handed People's Day," indicating famous and infamous lefties in history. In this way every day can be an informative Library Day and a celebration.

The techniques described above illustrate simple methods to spark interest and to focus on what libraries can do with current resources. These every day examples show how limitless the scope and supply can be if the entrepreneureial spirit is promoted.

Entrepreneurs have the ability and talent to think "unique thoughts". Their creativity not only shapes ideas but directs them toward implementation. It is their innovation that transfers an idea into a product, process, or event. They enjoy translating ideas into applications

A true entrepreneur infuses the grand design of an organization by encouraging new ways of doing things, or capitalizing on new opportunities.

Entrepreneurs think much more about opportunities than about problems. They see the challenge and remix old ideas into new applications in looking for new opportunities. Major innovations are thought to be the result of an analysis of: symptoms of change; new knowledge; changes in perception; the unexpected outside event, or the success or failure of something not anticpated.

While I do not know how "American" these ideas about entrepreneurial spirit are, it has been possible for us to begin thinking like entrepreneurs by learning to focus upon programming as the innovative mechanisism to interest inmates. Finally, the librarian must be made aware of the rewards of being receptive to innovation, not simply dealing exclusively in the realm of collection development.

STATUS OF LIBRARIES

In New York State even in the most politically sensitive times, legislators, as well as other officals, recognize libraries as worthwhile. Their conception of libraries ranks only slightly behind the concepts of "Motherhood" and "Apple Pie" as inherently virtuous in American society.

The task, however, is to have these nice words translate into meaningful support. It is to move from the passive form to the active mode and mainstream prison operations through sufficient funding. This has been achieved largely through library legislation with the 1984 Omnibus Bill.

Now is the time to utilize this aid to redirect our focus, become entrepreneurial, and invent ways to interest all inmates.

I believe that this international type of forum is the ideal place to develop these introduced themes further, comparing other countries' views and achievements.

I invite your response and questions.

Thank you.